



Federal Update for May 18 – 22, 2015



VA Launches Campaign to Increase Veterans' Economic Potential

DALLAS — Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald, with leaders from national and local Veterans service organizations, corporate employers and government agencies, announced the launch of the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative, an effort focused in a total of 50 U.S. cities to promote economic success for Veterans.

The initiative is part of MyVA, which is dedicated to making Veterans the center of all we do.

“The best way to get things done for Veterans is to involve partners from both the public and private sectors – national to local,” said McDonald. “If history has shown us anything, it’s that all you have to do is give Veterans an opportunity and they will go beyond anything you could ever envision. Community leaders understand the purpose of MyVA and will find innovative ways to support it.”

The goal of the VEI is to increase education and employment opportunities for America’s Veterans by bringing together local and national employers to coordinate services for Veterans, Servicemembers and military families.

With the sacred commitment of making customer service for Veterans the focal point, VA will look to communities around the country to help make the VA the best federal agency.

“MyVA will work State by state, community by community, person by person,” said McDonald.

“We want to expand our reach and collaboration in communities where Veterans live.”

The Veterans Economic Communities Initiative launch event was hosted in Dallas. Secretary McDonald and Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings provided remarks, during the event. Campaign partners also participated in panel discussions on public-private partnerships.

Representatives from major corporations such as Hilton and TriWest joined Secretary McDonald in pledging their commitment to furthering Veteran economic opportunities. The Veterans Economic Communities Initiative includes a VA Economic Liaison in each community who will expand and encourage collaboration among private and public organizations that offer resources related to education, training and employment. Through strategic partnerships, and by offering Veterans innovative forms of learning and employment

opportunities, these communities will help Veterans gain competitive career skills and knowledge in locally in-demand fields.

Campaign partners include the departments of Defense and Labor, the Small Business Administration and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in addition to regional and national nonprofits, businesses and educators. The first 25 communities were chosen based on local Veteran unemployment rates, Veteran population and the projected increase in Veteran population.

Communities participating in the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative include: Atlanta, Georgia; El Paso, Texas; Las Vegas, Nevada; New York, New York; San Antonio, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; Honolulu, Hawaii; Los Angeles, California; Norfolk, Virginia; San Diego, California; Cincinnati, Ohio; Houston, Texas; Louisville, Kentucky; Phoenix, Arizona; Seattle, Washington; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Jacksonville, Florida; Miami, Florida; Richmond, Virginia; St. Louis, Missouri; Dallas, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; Nashville, Tennessee; Riverside, California; Washington, DC.

Under the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative, communities will develop scalable, sustainable models over the next two years that include:

Resources and education for employers on hiring and supporting Veterans.

- Employment summits to connect talented job seekers with local employers who have immediate hiring needs.
- Policy academies where experts generate ideas, form partnerships and make policy recommendations that will help lower the unemployment rate and increase economic opportunities among Veterans and their families.
- Learning or resource hubs to help connect Veterans to economic opportunities including entrepreneurship, credentialing and skills building.

MCRMC Update ► Obama Sends Recommendations to Congress

President Barack Obama sent the recommendations of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission to Congress 30 APR. In the letter accompanying the report, Obama thanked the commission members and said their recommendations "represent an important step forward in protecting the long-term viability of the all-volunteer force, improving quality of life for service members and their families and ensuring the fiscal sustainability of the military compensation and retirement systems." The president is prepared to support specific proposals for 10 of the Commission's 15 recommendations. Since the commission released its report to the president in January, DoD officials have been over the recommendations with a fine-toothed comb. The department and the White House want to

move slowly on four of the commission's 15 recommendations and will begin executing the remaining 10.

The four that require more study are: the proposal for a blended retirement system, reserve component duty statuses, exceptional family member support and commissary and exchange consolidation. The 10 recommendations the president is prepared to support either in total or with modifications are: the Survivor Benefit Plan, financial education, medical personnel readiness, DoD and Department of Veterans Affairs collaboration, child care, service member education, transition assistance, dependent space-available travel and the report on military-connected dependents. Defense Secretary Ash Carter will submit proposals for legislation to Congress on some of the recommendations. For his part, Carter also praised the commission for its 18-month independent review. The commission looked at retirement and compensation programs administered both inside and outside DoD. "Their work confirmed many positive changes that we're making to uphold our commitments to our people, and also pointed out areas where we can do better," Carter said in a Pentagon release.

The commission's last recommendation on the military TRICARE health benefit program needs more work, the secretary said. "While we agree with the commission that reforms to the military health care system are needed, we also believe that the TRICARE proposals in President Obama's fiscal 2016 budget serve as a good first step by offering service members, military families and retirees greater choice and control over their health care decisions," Carter said in the release. The department will work with the commission, interagency partners and Congress this year to develop additional reform proposals for the fiscal year 2017 budget proposal. [Source: U.S. Department of Defense Daily Digest Bulletin | May 02, 2015 ++]

Commissary News Update ► Immediate Issues

Amid a swirl of proposals for historic changes to the commissary benefit, the Defense Commissary Agency is dealing with more immediate issues — like making sure products get to store shelves. At a recent commissary meeting, several officials expressed concern about a growing number of "vendor cuts," in which vendors ship smaller quantities than the commissary orders, causing shortages on the shelves. "When a product isn't available, we are going to lose customers," Joseph Jeu, DeCA director, said at the meeting of the American Logistics Association. Such vendor cuts generally run about 1 percent to 2 percent across the industry, but Jeu said the comparable rate for commissaries is running from 4 percent to 6 percent. Noting that many manufacturers are performing well, Jeu challenged members of industry to do their part to improve deliveries to the military's stores.

Jeu also discussed DoD's fiscal 2016 budget proposal, now being considered by Congress. Proposed cuts to the commissary budget, which would require cutbacks in store hours and days, among other things, initially were rejected by the House Armed Services Committee. "If Congress comes out with a different budget, obviously we'll adjust our plan," Jeu said, but added that until then, DeCA is basing its preparations on the plan submitted by DoD — while

also trying to improve the benefit for customers. "While there are a lot of uncertainties, we are marching ahead," Jeu said. "We are forging ahead with our effort to transform the agency, make it as efficient as possible, and provide the best possible service to our military families."

Pat Nixon, president of the American Logistics Association, praised DeCA for its approach in focusing on improving the benefit, even as major cutback proposals swirl around it. Nixon said Jeu and other DeCA leaders are "focusing the efforts and brain power of the agency on the things they can control right now: sales, and savings and customer satisfaction."

Rising vendor cuts is just one issue DeCA is trying to address in the supply chain, said Michael Dowling, the agency's deputy director. For example, industry distributors have challenges related to driver shortages, weather and other issues. The commissary agency itself has challenges within the stores, such as hiring difficulties in many locations. These things together "spell trouble," Dowling said. "We'll be giving serious consideration to what our options are, and what can we do to improve it. We've got to make sure the benefit is relevant to our customers. If it's relevant, they will come. If they come, they'll tell people how much value the benefit has for them." Vendor cuts occur when DeCA places an order — for example, 500 cases of ketchup — but the manufacturer doesn't fill the full order, for a potential variety of reasons. Often, Nixon said, manufacturers cut the needed quantity "based on something else happening in the marketplace."

Eric Swayzee, DeCA's logistics director, said he's especially concerned about the effect of vendor cuts on young families on the DoD Overseas WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program. When the only WIC item the family can buy in a particular category is out of stock, it means the family must go without because WIC cannot be used in off-base stores overseas. That program, administered by DoD, is similar to WIC programs operated by the states, providing vouchers for specified foods such as milk, vegetables, peanut butter and cheese, depending on the nutrition needs for low-income pregnant or postpartum women, and children up to age 5. Richard Page, senior vice president of customer services for Coastal Pacific Food Distributors, which distributes products from manufacturers to commissaries on the West Coast, said the impact of vendor cuts is felt beyond the commissaries. "A number of manufacturers have told us they have had the same issue outside the gate," he said. He noted that the recent economic downturn led companies to tighten their belts, particularly in terms of inventory levels. Distribution centers were closed, or consolidated, which led to reduced inventory in the pipeline.

Among other DeCA initiatives discussed at the meeting:

- A push to improve customer service, which includes two "ambassadors" in each store, identified through peer nominations. This initiative includes back-to-basics customer service training and how to engage with shoppers. For example, if a customer asks where a product is, the employee — regardless of his job — should take the customer to the product.

- Standardization of meat pricing. All continental U.S. commissaries will be on board by June 1. Since officials began rolling out the program last June, DeCA says customers have seen an extra \$2.3 million in savings.
- Replacement of commissary agency technology, which will affect product ordering and cash registers. The rewards card program will expand, with programs like "diaper clubs" and "dog food clubs" offering special promotions. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | May 09, 2015 ++]

NDA for 2016 Update ► Senate supports 1/3% Pay Raise

Senate lawmakers on 12 MAY shook hopes for a larger military pay raise next year by recommending only a 1.3 percent hike in their draft version of the 2016 defense authorization bill, a move that could further widen the "pay gap" between troops and their civilian counterparts. The Senate Armed Services Committee's personnel panel differs from the House version of the annual budget legislation, which instead defers to existing law that suggests troops should get a 2.3 percent raise next year. However, the House version does not include specific language mandating the bigger raise, leaving the door open for the White House to substitute its own pay figure. President Obama already has indicated his preference for only a 1.3 percent raise, to help rein in military personnel costs. For an E-4 with three years' service, the difference between the two potential pay raises would total about \$268 a year. For an O-4 with 12 years, it would be about \$838.

Outside advocates say that can have real impact on service members' financial stability, especially when paired with lower housing allowances and increased pharmacy co-pays suggested by the Pentagon. They also noted that military pay raises have been stuck below average annual increases in private-sector wages for the last two years, widening the salary gap between civilian workers and their military counterparts. But defense officials say the lower pay level could save the department about \$4 billion over the next five years that could be reinvested in training and modernization programs. On Tuesday, personnel subcommittee chairman Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) said the smaller pay raise was one of a series of unpalatable options lawmakers are being forced to accept because of looming budget caps. "Sequestration has caused us to make some difficult cuts, some draconian cuts," Graham said. "Until we can replace that with rational cuts, this is only going to get worse."

Full details of the personnel panel's markup of its slice of the authorization bill will not be made public until later this week, after the full armed services committee has reviewed its entire draft bill. But Graham said the measure will also include "slight changes" to housing allowances, which were trimmed by 1 percent last year in another cost-savings measure. The draft bill also will again call for increased beneficiary co-pays for Tricare drug prescriptions. House members rejected both of those ideas in their draft. Graham said the Senate draft also will include

changes to military retirement benefits based on recent recommendations from the congressionally mandated Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission. That plan would replace the current 20-year, all-or-nothing retirement system with a 401(k)-style retirement plan and pension-style retirement payout. The change would allow all troops to receive some retirement benefits, but has received criticism from some military advocates over fears it could hurt retention.

Graham said his panel's version of retirement reform differs from what's in the House bill, meaning the two retirement overhaul plans would need to be reconciled in a conference committee. The Senate version of the bill is expected to be finalized later this week. No time frame has been outlined for when the legislation might reach the Senate floor for consideration by the full chamber. The House is expected to finalize its draft by the end of the week, opening the door for conference committee work in early summer if a full Senate vote comes in the next few weeks. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | May 12, 2015 ++]

Military Pay & Benefits ► DoD's Position on NDAA Proposals

The Pentagon for the first time has offered a detailed response to a slate of proposed military pay and benefits reforms, flatly rejecting the idea of overhauling the military health care system but giving a cautious green light to fundamentally changing military retirement benefits. After a three-month review, the Defense Department bluntly dismissed the controversial idea of scrapping the Tricare health system in its current form and instead providing military dependents with private-sector health insurance similar to federal civilian employee benefits.

On the issue of military retirement, DoD "generally agrees there are merits to a blended retirement" system that would shrink the size of the current pension but create 401(k)-style investment accounts that would for the first time provide a retirement benefit to troops who serve less than 20 years, according to a Pentagon memo obtained by Military Times. But in the 10-page memo sent to the White House this week, the Pentagon stopped short of endorsing the proposed retirement plan, saying it will continue to "carefully consider" the commission's proposal and promising to "complete a detailed and holistic evaluation" by the end of July. For now, lawmakers on Capitol Hill appear to be putting the retirement reform proposal on a fast track, and the Pentagon's position signals that it will offer no significant opposition to the changes under consideration. The Pentagon memo to the White House, signed by Defense Secretary Ash Carter and dated April 27, was followed on Thursday by a formal statement from President Obama directed to Congress summarizing the military's recommendations.

The official DoD views came three months after the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission recommended an array of controversial changes. The military's views likely will have a strong influence on Congress as it considers changes to laws affecting military pay and benefits. Specifically, the proposed retirement system would reduce the size of

the current pension for career troops by 20 percent. At the same time, the military would begin offering all troops contributions to individual investment accounts that they would own after completing two years of service. The contribution would be at least 1 percent of basic pay for all troops, even if they invest nothing themselves, and a dollar-for-dollar match up to an additional 5 percent for troops who agree to contribute their own out-of-pocket money. The proposal also would create a new lump-sum retention pay for troop who serve at least 12 years and agree to remain in uniform for an additional four years

Congress is making two significant changes to the commission's retirement proposal. For one, it is scrapping the suggestion that troops should have the option of receiving a large part of their retirement benefit in a lump-sum cash payment at the time of retirement rather than in monthly pension checks. In addition, Congress wants to offer government contributions to the individual investment accounts for every year of service; the commission proposed halting those contributions after 20 years.

The new system would be mandatory for all new troops. Today's service members would be grandfathered under the current system, but would be permitted to opt into the new benefit. Some analysts suggest the proposed benefit would be more lucrative in the long run if individual troops make good investment decisions and the stock market continues to rise. Critics say the proposed plan puts troops at risk for making bad financial decisions. Congress created the compensation commission two years ago amid concerns about rising military personnel costs. At a time when defense spending is capped under the federal law known as sequestration, the top brass worries that those growing manpower accounts could erode the military's ability to invest in modern weapons and high-tech research. But the rejection of the health care proposals will significantly reduce the prospect of cutting long-term per-troop military personnel costs. The compensation commission said its health care reform plan would save the Pentagon \$6 billion a year. DoD also commented on several other proposed changes to military pay and benefits. Among them:

- **Commissaries.** The Defense Department "supports the general premise of consolidating" the commissary and exchange systems but declined to offer any clear recommendation on the matter. Defense officials will continue to study the issue and provide a recommendation in July.
- **Reserve component duty statuses:** DoD Department took no firm position on a long-sought goal for the reserve components —simplifying the complex array of more than 30 duty statuses and legal authorities that define reservists' service. While defense officials agree that consolidating those duty statuses "makes a lot of sense," such a move would have far-reaching legal repercussions affecting reservists' pay and benefits. Like retirement reform, DoD said it will study the matter further and provide a recommendation in July.
- **Education benefits:** DoD does not support a proposal to restrict veterans from simultaneously receiving some GI Bill housing stipends and unemployment insurance.

That may be viewed as "penalizing service members" who are taking classes to improve their employment prospects, according to the memo.

- **Veterans health care records:** DoD rejected the commission's call for the Veterans Affairs Department to create health care records for all current active-duty service members. Instead, military officials want to press ahead with their ongoing effort to create an interoperable system of health care records between the two agencies.
- **Financial education:** DoD supports the expansion of financial education for troops, but said it does not need the changes to current laws proposed by the compensation commission. Those changes would legally require the military to expand current financial literacy programs, conduct surveys to track progress and make incremental changes such as simplifying pay-stub data.
- **GI Bill:** DoD agrees that the Montgomery GI Bill should be eliminated and all service members consolidated under the more generous Post-9/11 GI Bill.
- **Survivor Benefit Plan:** DoD supports changes to the current Survivor Benefit Plan that would increase the benefit by eliminating part of the current offset for spouses receiving certain benefits from VA.
- **Space-A:** DoD supports a proposal to expand military dependents' eligibility for no-cost "Space Available" travel on military aircraft. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | April 30, 2015 ++]

PTSD Update ► Bad-Paper Discharges Impact on Treatment

Veterans groups claim in Federal Court that the military is trying to keep a lid on "bad-paper discharges" it handed tens of thousands of service members who likely suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder before the medical community recognized that condition. Vietnam Veterans of America and the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress brought the complaint on 4 MAY against the U.S. Department of Defense and three military branches. They say that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs denies disability compensation and other benefits to veterans who received other-than-honorable (OTH) discharges, but that many who received such "bad-paper discharges" are the tens of thousands of servicemembers suffering from undiagnosed PTSD. PTSD was not recognized as a medical condition until 1980, according to the complaint.

While Congress has created internal boards to consider applications by veterans seeking to revise their discharge papers, the veterans say these boards "have collectively failed to prioritize or take seriously discharge upgrade requests from veterans diagnosed with PTSD stemming from military service." From 1993 to 2014, the Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records approved fewer than 5 percent of these type of applications from Vietnam veterans, according to the complaint. Crediting a class action they filed last year, the groups note that Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel issued a memorandum in September 2014 that instructed the boards to give veterans with PTSD "liberal consideration." The groups say

they in turn filed requests under the Freedom of Information Act for records showing how the boards adjudicated PTSD related applications before and after Hagel's so-called "PTSD Upgrade Memo."

"Disclosure of these records is essential for the public to assess DOD's compliance with the directive and assist veterans seeking to apply for discharge upgrades," the complaint states, but the government has thus far allegedly failed to provide responsive, non-exempt records within the statutory time period. "Without information about how DOD, Army, Navy, Air Force, and their respective boards have handled PTSD-related discharge upgrade applications, the public cannot hold these entities accountable for the fair and just treatment of veterans," the complaint states. The groups note that the records implicate an estimated 80,000 Vietnam veterans, many of whom are elderly, indigent and suffer from medical problems. Without records showing whether these veterans' discharges are being reconsidered, the groups say that Hagel's memo is "merely a symbolic gesture."

The last communication that the groups had with the Defense Department was on Dec. 29, 2014, when the agency said it was working on the request. The Air Force allegedly urged the groups to narrow the scope of their request. The Navy told the plaintiffs it was closing the request as duplicative of the one filed with the Defense Department, and the Army declined to process most of the request as "unduly burdensome," according to the complaint. The groups say they narrowed their Dec. 8, 2014, requests to the military branches in March and April, but have not received a response. They are represented by Michael Wishnie of the Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization. [Source: Courthouse News Service | Christine Stuart | May 06, 2015++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515) Korean War (7,852), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,627), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> and click on 'Our Missing'. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

- Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs
- Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420
- Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>

Vietnam

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 5 MAY that the remains of a serviceman, missing from the Vietnam War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Master Sgt. James W. Holt, 26, of Hope, Ark., will be buried May 14, 2015, in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington D.C. On Feb. 7, 1968, Holt was assigned to Company C, 5th Special Forces Group, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam. Survivors of the attack reported that Holt was manning a 106-mm recoilless rifle in a mortar pit near the camp of Lang Vei, when he depleted his ammunition destroying an enemy tank. The survivors also reported that he was last seen running toward the ammunition bunker. Holt was reported as missing in action following the battle. A military review board later amended his status to resumed killed in action. On June 21, 1989, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (S.R.V.) unilaterally turned over remains that were believed to be those of a U.S. serviceman. Vietnamese officials recovered the remains from a refugee, but lacked necessary documentation for identification. Due to the technology at that time, the remains could not be identified. In 1995 and 2004, joint U.S./S.R.V. teams excavated areas within the perimeter of the former Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, and recovered human remains. The remains were identified as Sgt. Maj. Kenneth Hanna, Master Sgt. Charles W. Lindewald, and Sgt. 1st Class James L. Moreland. All three identified servicemen were buried with full military honors in Jan. 15, 2005, Feb. 5, 2005 and May 14, 2011, respectively.

In the identification of Holt, scientists from the DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence, from the 1989 unilateral turnover, and forensic identification tools, including two forms of DNA analysis; mitochondrial DNA, which matched his sister and brothers, and Y chromosome Short Tandem Repeat (Y-STR) DNA, which matched his brothers.

Korea

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 29 APR the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Master Sgt. Francis H. Stamer of San Fernando, California, will be buried May 6, in Arlington National Cemetery. On Nov. 1, 1950, Stamer was assigned to Company M, 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, when his unit was attacked by Chinese forces at Unsan village in North Korea. This attack forced the unit to withdraw five miles southeast to Ipsok village. Stamer was reported missing in action on Nov. 2, 1950. A military board later amended his status to killed in action. Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains believed to contain more than 400 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents, turned over with some of the boxes, indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the area where Stamer was believed to have died. To identify Stamer's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including two forms of DNA analysis; mitochondrial DNA, which matched his niece and Y-chromosomal Short Tandem Repeat (YSTR)

DNA, which matched his nephew.

UPDATE: The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 8 MAY that the remains of a U.S. soldier, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Cpl. Ben L. Brown, 17, of Four Mile, Ore., will be buried 15 MAY, in Roseburg, Ore. In early 1951, Brown was assigned to Company I, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division (ID), which was occupying positions in the vicinity of Hoengsong, South Korea, when their defensive line was attacked by Chinese forces. This attack forced the unit to withdraw south to a more defensible position. After the battle, Brown was reported missing in action. A military review board later reviewed the loss of Brown, declaring him dead and his remains non-recoverable.

Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains believed to contain more than 400 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents, turned over with some of the boxes, indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where POWs from Brown's unit were believed to have died. To identify Brown's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence, dental comparison, which matched his records, and two forms of forensic identification tools, to include mitochondrial DNA analysis, which matched his sister and brother, and Y-chromosome Short Tandem Repeat (Y-STR) DNA, which matched his brother.

UPDATE: The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) officially announced 5 MAY that the missing Korean War remains of Army Pfc. Eugene L. Erickson, 21, of Brainerd, Minn. have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. He will be buried 13 MAY, in Santa Fe, N.M. In mid May 1951, Erickson and elements of Company B, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment (IR), 2nd Infantry Division (ID), were engaged against enemy forces north of 18 Houghon, South Korea, when their unit was overwhelmed by Chinese forces. This attack caused the 38th IR to withdraw south to a more defensible position. Erickson was reported missing after the attack.

In September 1953, as part of a prisoner of war exchange known as Operation Big Switch, returning American soldiers who had been held as prisoners of war, reported that Erickson had been captured by Chinese forces. Reports indicated he died in the summer of 1951 from dysentery and malnutrition, while held in a prisoner of war camp in Suan, North Korea. A military review board later amended Erickson's status to deceased. Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains believed to contain more than 400 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents, turned over at that time, indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where Erickson was believed to have died. In the identification of Erickson's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including two forms of DNA analysis, mitochondrial DNA, which matched

his brother and niece, and Y-Chromosome Short Tandem Repeat (Y-STR) DNA, which matched his brother.

World War II

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 5 MAY that two U.S. servicemen, missing from World War II, have been identified and are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors. The two servicemen are Army Air Force Staff Sgts. Robert E. Howard, 21, of Moravia, Iowa, and David R. Kittredge, 22, of Oneida, Wis. The individually identified remains of Howard were buried July 19, 2014, in Moulton, Iowa. The individually identified remains of Kittredge were buried Aug. 13, 2014, in Green Bay, Wis. The remains that could not be individually identified will be buried as a group in a single casket, May 27, 2015, in Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C.

On April 16, 1945, three aircraft were flying in a formation on a bombing raid to Wittenberg, Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany, when the pilots of two other aircraft reported seeing Howard and Kittredge's aircraft hit by enemy fire. The B-26B descended into a deep dive and exploded upon ground impact. In 2007, a German aircraft researcher interviewed eyewitnesses, who reported seeing two deceased crew members buried near the crash site under an apple tree. He also reported the crew members as being exhumed in 1947 or 1948, by an allied recovery team. In June 2012, a German national informed the U.S. government that he found possible human remains in Muhlanger, which he believed to have been associated with an April 1945, B-26B crash, and turned them over to the local police. In July 2012, a Department of Defense (DoD) team began excavating the site recovering human remains, personal effects and aircraft wreckage. DoD also took custody of the remains that the local German national had previously recovered. To identify Howard's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools such as mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). To identify Kittredge's remains, scientists from DPAA and AFDIL also used mtDNA and dental comparisons, which matched his records.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 28 APR that of U.S. servicemen, missing from World War II, have been accounted for and their remains are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors. Army Air Forces 1st Lt. William P. Cook, 27, of Alameda, Calif., Staff Sgts. Maurice J. Fevold, 21, of Chicago, and Frank G. Lane Jr., 21, of Cleveland, and Sgt. Eric M. Honeyman, 21, of Alameda, Calif., have been accounted for and will be buried with full military honors. Cook was buried Oct. 18, 2014, in Oakland, Calif. Fevold was buried Oct. 20, 2014, in Ft. Dodge, Iowa, Lane will be buried May 2, 2015, in Willoughby, Ohio, and Honeyman will be buried at a date and location still to be determined. On Dec. 23, 1944, Cook along with five other B-26G Marauder crewmembers took off from Saint Quentin, France, on a mission to bomb an enemy-held bridge in Eller, Germany. The aircraft was shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire near Seffern, Germany, near the Belgium border.

Following World War II, the Army Graves Registration Command (AGRC) conducted extensive field investigations and was unable to locate the aircraft and the crew. In May 1949, AGRC concluded the crew members were unrecoverable. In 2006, a group of aviation researchers located the wreckage of a B-26G near Allmuthen, Belgium and notified the U.S. Army Mortuary Affairs Activity – Europe. In 2007, a Department of Defense (DoD) team investigated the site and recommended it for excavation. In 2012 and 2013, DoD teams excavated the crash site and recovered human remains and non-biological material evidence. To identify Cook's remains, scientists from DoD and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including mitochondrial DNA, which matched Cook's maternal-line cousins. To identify Honeyman's remains, scientists from DoD and AFDIL used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools including, partial Y-Chromosome Short Tandem Repeat (Y-STR) DNA, which matched Honeyman's paternal-line cousins.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 8 MAY that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, unaccounted for during World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Marine Pfc. Jack M. Redman, 20, of Watseka, Ill., will be buried 16 MAY, in his hometown. In November 1943, Redman was assigned to the Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, which landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll, in an attempt to secure the island against stiff Japanese resistance. Over several days of intense fighting approximately 1,000 Marines were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. As a result of these attacks, Redman was reported killed in action on Nov. 23, 1943.

In the immediate aftermath of the fighting on Tarawa, U.S. service members who died were buried in a number of battlefield cemeteries. During World War II, U.S. Navy Combat Engineers, "SeaBees," significantly restructured the landscape to convert the island for use by the military. In 1944, it was reported that Redman had been buried along with another service member. In 1947, the Army Grave Registration Service (AGRS) recovered remains from the island for repatriation, but Redman's remain were not recovered. The remains that AGRS were unable to identify were buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, in Honolulu, Hawaii, known as the Punch Bowl.

In 2011, researchers were able to determine Redman was not buried in an unknown gravesite at the Punch Bowl and believed his remains may still be on Betio. In 2013, the Department of Defense (DoD) analysts located what was believed to be Redman's grave. In September 2014, while the DoD team was excavating the suspected burial site, a local villager turned over a fragment of remains recovered nearby. This aided the team in pinpointing the location of Redman's gravesite. In the identification of Redman's remains, DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including dental and skeletal comparisons, which matched Redman's records, and mitochondrial DNA, which matched Redman's brother.

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | May 14, 2015 ++]

Statement from Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald

WASHINGTON, DC— Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald made the following statement regarding the construction of the Denver Replacement Medical Center in Aurora, Colorado:

“The delays and costs overruns that have plagued the Denver Replacement Medical Center campus are inexcusable – on that, we all agree.

And, on behalf of Veterans, I want to work with Congress in productive ways to repair mistakes made years ago by VA officials.

But the truth of the matter is without immediate Congressional action prior to returning home for the Memorial Day holiday recess, construction on the Denver Replacement Medical Center in Aurora will shut down Sunday, grinding to a halt as Kiewit Turner demobilizes its team of contractors and sub-contractors.

The Deputy and I have been discussing the pending deadline with Congress for months. The Congressional authorizing committees held a field hearing in Colorado on the issue. The Congressional representatives from Colorado have been actively engaged in the Senate and the House to find a solution. They have worked with the VA, the Congressional authorizing committees, and Congressional leadership to facilitate conversations and proposals, convey a sense of urgency on behalf of veterans, and act as good stewards for the American taxpayer. Despite all of this work, the Congressional leadership has not acted on reasonable offers. In fact, as late as Monday, I asked Congressional leadership to work with VA to find a way to continue construction and prevent this shutdown. Specifically, I asked that we increase authorization for the project an additional \$200 million beyond the current cap of \$800 million and that VA be allowed to repurpose and reallocate our FY 2015 funds.

I have provided multiple proposals to the Congressional authorizing committee as to how we can complete this campus for Veterans. The options were rejected and the result has been inaction. Our Veterans deserve better than that. I have presented a plan. Congress has not proposed a counter plan. I am open to reviewing any proposal that would better serve the Veterans of Colorado and the American taxpayers. If Congressional leaders choose not to support VA’s proposals, or choose to offer feasible solutions of their own, then they will be punishing Colorado Veterans today for past VA errors.

Let me be clear. Inaction by Congress will punish the nearly 400,000 Colorado Veterans and families that Aurora will serve – as well as taxpayers across the Nation.

This shutdown can be avoided. I am confident that Congress can yet act in the best interest of Veterans and their families and work with VA to finish Aurora.

I strongly urge Congress to stand for Veterans this week and act now to prevent a shutdown of the Denver Replacement Medical Center in Aurora. We at VA remain committed to work with Congress on this and many other challenges and opportunities as we transform VA into the Veteran-centric, customer-service oriented organization Veterans have earned and deserve.”